DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 337 CS 512 055

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TITLE	Family Message Journals Teach Many Purposes for Writing.
INSTITUTION	MarcoPolo Education Foundation.; National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, IL.; International Reading Association, Newark, DE.
PUB DATE	2003-01-13
NOTE	8p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Managing Editor, ReadWriteThink, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Rd., P.O. Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139. E-mail: comments@readwritethink.org. For full text: http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Critical Thinking; Evaluation Methods; *Family Communication; *Journal Writing; Lesson Plans; Primary Education; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Family Message Journals are tools for learning, thinking, and self-expression. By writing several messages with varied purposes, students begin to experience that journal writing can serve many purposes. It can help them remember; make sense of new information and ideas; and recognize, develop, and share personal thoughts and reactions. During three 30-40 minute lessons, grade K-2 students will: use writing as a form of daily communication with families for several different purposes (to remember and share their learning, to make sense of new information and ideas by connecting these to what they know, and to recognize, develop, and share personal thoughts and reactions); become more aware of the many benefits and uses of writing; and think about how to write clearly and legibly for readers. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the lesson are included. A letter to family is attached which explains the Family Message Journal. (PM)

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Family Message Journals Teach Many Purposes for Writing

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Grade Band

K-2

Estimated Lesson Time

Three 30-40 minute sessions

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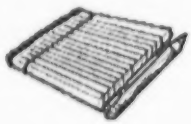
Overview

Family Message Journals are tools for learning, thinking, and self-expression. When writing messages about school activities children may recall, think about, and articulate what they have learned; connect new information to the known; and express their own thoughts and feelings about topics. By writing several messages with varied purposes, students begin to experience that journal writing can serve many purposes—it can help them remember; make sense of new information and ideas; and recognize, develop, and share personal thoughts and reactions. Regardless of topic, writing is a powerful tool for thinking and communicating ideas.



From Theory to Practice

Wollman-Bonilla, Julie. (2000). *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing through Family Involvement.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

- Writing is a powerful tool for learning, thinking, and self-expression.
- When writing about an activity, children may recall, think about, and explain what they have learned; connect new information to the known; and express their own thoughts and feelings about it.
- Young writers need frequent opportunities to express themselves in writing, trying to match sounds to letters and to communicate clearly and legibly.
- Children need to write for real purposes and audiences if they are to learn that writing is personally meaningful and a powerful communication tool.
- Families are an authentic audience for journal messages about school activities. Children's writing must be clear enough to communicate what happened in school to those who were not there. Family Message Journals help young writers develop awareness of readers' needs.
- Children naturally enjoy communicating with others and learn about content, style, spelling, and other mechanics by writing to be understood and getting feedback on whether they were successful.
- Family Message Journals engage families in modeling writing and create a literacy community inclusive of the classroom and the home.
- Family involvement has a positive effect on children's school achievement.

Student Objectives

Students will

- use writing as a form of daily communication with families for several different purposes: to remember and share their learning; to make sense of new information and ideas by connecting

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these to what they know; and to recognize, develop, and share personal thoughts and reactions.

- become more aware of the many benefits and uses of writing.
- think about how to write clearly and legibly for readers.

Resources

- Family Letter
- Interactive Venn Diagram
- Journal Writing Every Day: Teachers Say It Works!
- The History Channel Web Site
- Seaworld Animal Information Database Web Site

Instructional Plan

Resources

1. Teachers seeking assistance with getting Family Message Journals started should consult "Launching Family Message Journals."
2. A booklet or notebook to be used as a journal. Lined paper with an unlined block at the top (for illustrations) works well in the beginning.
3. Family Letter (if not distributed in an earlier lesson).
4. Back-up people to reply if a child's family members cannot participate, such as a student teacher in the school, a special subject teacher, the principal, or librarian.
5. Optional resources for the example topics used in this lesson:

   Whales and Dolphins
   Davidson, Margaret. (1985). *Dolphins!*. NY: Scholastic.
   Himmelman, John. (1990). *Ibis: A True Whale Story*. NY: Scholastic.
   Serventy, Vincent. (1984). *Animals in the Wild: Whale and Dolphin*. NY: Scholastic
   Sheldon, Dyan (1997). *The Whales' Song*. NY: Puffin.
   Website: Sea World Animal Information Database

   Native Americans
   Kids Discover. (2003). *Southwest Peoples*, vol. 13, no. 1. (And earlier issues on Native Americans)
   Web site: The History Channel

6. Optional Book: Wollman-Bonilla, Julie. (2000). *Family Message Journals: Teaching Writing through Family Involvement*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, for many more ideas about message topics, how to handle potential problems, etc.

Preparation

1. Choose the activities, books, or experience about which children will write their three messages, each with a different purpose. These should grow from your curriculum. One message could focus on remembering, thinking about, and explaining to families what they have learned from an experience. For example: a unit on dolphins ands whales which included reading nonfiction (*Animals in the Wild: Whales and Dolphins and Dolphins!*), realistic fiction (*Ibis: A True Whale Story and The Whales' Song*), Venn diagram comparison of the two animals, storytelling with a large whale puppet, exploration of the Sea World Web site, and a visit to or speaker from the local aquarium.

   The second message could focus on connecting new information to what children already know. For

example: based on a study of Native American life which included magazines (*Kids Discover: Southwest Peoples* and *Kids Discover: Native America*), books, and Web site exploration (The History Channel site), children use their messages to compare their lives with those of Native Americans.

The third message could focus on expressing personal thoughts and feelings. For example, thoughts about a character in a chapter book you are reading aloud to the class. Other possibilities include using a message to: remember a responsibility (e.g. something children need to bring to school the next day), to recall and savor a special experience, or to think through a plan (e.g. how I will go about gathering information for my project). The foundational activities could be books read aloud, a science inquiry, a social studies lesson, a school assembly, a field trip, a celebration, making new friends, an assigned homework project, or any other topic drawing on school experiences.

2. Prepare and photocopy the Family Letter if it has not been used in an earlier lesson. Have it translated into families' home languages as necessary.

Instruction and Activities

1. This lesson assumes that students have already been introduced to writing in their Family Message Journals and have written at least a couple messages already. Explain to students that today they are going to write a message that will help them remember and think about everything they've learned about a topic and explain it to their families. Any brief unit you've studied works well for the message topic, or the message can focus on a single lesson or experience such as a nonfiction read aloud. Briefly discuss how previous messges were written, or at least started together as whole-class, guided writing. Have students look at those messages. Note how they began; have a few children share their opening sentence or entire message. Explain that today students will be starting the writing on their own, but first you will talk about ideas for their messages and some possible opening sentences (see #3 below).
2. Remind students of the fiction and nonfiction books and other activities you have experienced as part of the whale and dolphin unit (in this example). For a few minutes engage students in large group brainstorming of everything they can remember about whales and dolphins, but stop before they have exhausted ideas and explain that they can put all of their other ideas in their messages too. Tell them that they will probably think of more ideas as they write—writing helps us remember. Remind children that their families will be reading the messages; the children's job is to teach their families everything they know about whales and dolphins and their differences and similarities. Since their families were not here in the classroom for the unit, the children are the experts and can impress their families with all they know.
3. As students begin their messages remind them to put the date and greeting in the correct places and to make sure their message topic is clear at the beginning so their families understand what they are writing about. For example, they might want to write "We learned all about whales and dolphins" or "We just finished studying whales and dolphins. I will tell you all I know about them" or any other topic-orienting opening. You might want to stop them briefly after most students have an opening on paper and allow a few to share the first sentence or two and say what they will write next. This provides a model for children who might need it.
4. As children write, notice what they are doing and share it as appropriate. For example, "I notice the way Carlos wrote 'Whales and dolphins live in water but they are not fish. Did you know that? They are mammals. That is why they have to come out of the water to breathe.' I like the way he explained that being mammals means that whales and dolphins need to come to the surface for air because that will help his family understand. Remind children to listen for the sounds they want to write and spell it as best they can. Because children can read the messages to their families at home, or tell them what the messages are about, it is okay if the spellings are not clear to families. Children will learn from this that they need to work at spelling but they will still be able to share their messages and get response. (The attached Family Letter, if not used in an earlier lesson, explains Family Message Journals and families' expected roles. For children whose home language is not English, they may write in English and tell their families what it says, or they may write their home language if that seems most appropriate. Families may reply in the home language if that is most comfortable and children can understand it.)

5. As children announce they are finished, ask if there's anything they can add. Challenge each one to reread what they've written and think of at least one more whale and dolphin fact to add or something they can add to what they've written to make the message clearer to family members or to provide helpful detail. Suggest an example or two of such detail. Finally, invite children to illustrate their messages. Often children's ideas are communicated through drawing and drawing may spark ideas for additions to the written message. After illustrating, engage children in a brief discussion of how writing may have helped them remember and think about so many whale and dolphin facts! Now they have a record of what they've learned that they can keep and share and impress others with.
6. At the beginning of the next session tell children that they will be writing a message comparing what they know to new information that they are just learning. In this example they will compare how they are used to living to how Native Americans lived many years ago, based on what they've learned in a social studies lesson (any topic that requires them to connect what they know to new information works well here). Ask children as a group to quickly brainstorm what they remember about Early Native Americans for a few minutes. Then introduce them to the Interactive Venn Diagram. You can fill this is in as a class, beginning with the ideas already brainstormed, or children can work on it in small groups once they've learned how to use the tool. One circle should be labeled "Early Native American Life" and one "My Life." The resulting diagram can be printed with copies for students to refer to while writing their messages.

   Begin message writing with the reminder of where to place the date and greeting and where to begin the message. Then tell children they will write a write a fact that they've learned about Early Native American life followed by a comparison to their own lives. For example, "Early Native Americans hunted for and grew all their own food. We buy most of our food at the grocery store." Circulate to provide support, share suggestions, and recognize what children are doing that others might want to try (e.g., setting up their message as two lists, one for past Native American customs and one for contemporary customs, or paying careful attention to printing neatly so the message is legible). When the messages and illustrations are complete, engage the children in a brief discussion of how writing helped them compare their lives to Native American lives long ago, and imagine what it might be like to live like an Early Native American, living without the conveniences of our daily lives.
7. At the beginning of the next session tell children they will use their messages that day to say how they feel about something. They might write about their feelings in response to a book read aloud, a discussion about pollution, a debate about what the tooth fairy looks like, etc. Writing about their favorite character in a read aloud works well. For example, tell the children now that the class is almost done with the daily read aloud, *Charlotte's Web*, each student will think about who their favorite character is in the book and write a message about that character. Brainstorm a list of all of the characters, major and minor. Then tell children to pick their favorite, or one of their favorites, and think about why. Ask a few students to share who they chose and try to say one or two reasons why that character is their favorite, to provide a model for others. It might be what the character does, or who s/he reminds you of, or what s/he looks like, or what happens to him or her, or anything else that is important to them. Then tell children to begin their messages, remembering date, greeting, and an opening that tells families what the message is about. Challenge each child to write at least three reasons for their choice of favorite character, remembering that this message should be about what you think, so no one's message will be the same. This is a chance to think about and share your own thoughts and feelings. Again circulate as children write to encourage and share what they are doing, follow writing with illustrating, and perhaps sharing of the messages so children can begin to appreciate the range of personal responses.

Web Resources

Journal Writing Every Day: Teachers Say It Works!
http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr144.shtml
Article on "Journal writing every day: teachers say it works" with examples from many classrooms.

Seaworld Animal Information Database
http://www.seaworld.org/infobook.html

A child-friendly source of information on sea animals.

The History Channel
http://www.historychannel.com
Search links to Early Native Americans for information on daily life that lends itself to comparison with students' modern lives.

Interactive Venn Diagram
http://www.readwritethink.org/materials/venn/index.html
Interactive Venn Diagram

Student Assessment/Reflections

1. Observe as students compose: What are they struggling with? What is getting easier? Are they using suggestions from you and other students? Are they excited about writing messages and sharing family replies?

2. During discussions, or one-on-one while writing, are students able to articulate how writing helped them remember, think, and understand topics and their own feelings? If not, that does not necessarily mean they aren't beginning to appreciate these purposes. Do they, at other times, ask to write ideas to help them remember and think (e.g. "Can we put what we remember in our journals?" or "Can we tell our families about the assembly in our journals?")? Are they proud of being able to record and share what they've learned and how they feel?

3. Review student journals regularly using the following checklist (adapt this list to your students' needs and to your expectations as these evolve over the course of the school year). This list can also be taped inside the cover of students' journals as a reminder and for ongoing self-assessment.

   Checklist
   - Do I have enough information, detail, and explanation?
   - Are my date, greeting, message body, and sign-off in the right place?
   - Did I start every sentence with a capital and end with the right punctuation?
   - Did I check my spelling and make any changes?
   - Does my message show that I've learned about the topic?

4. Keep anecdotal notes about your observations and review of journals. Save a photocopy of a sample journal entry every two to four weeks to use for comparison and evidence of growth or need for instructional support.

NCTE/IRA Standards

4 - Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

5 - Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

11 - Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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Attachments:
Family Letter:

September XX, 200X

Dear Families,

This is your child's Family Message Journal. Your child will be bringing it home for homework everyday. Please read the day's message and ask your child to tell you about the message and drawing. Do not worry if the message is difficult for you to read—it is written in first-grade spelling. Your child's messages become easier to read over the course of the year.

Print a message back to your child just below his or her message. Write about the same topic. Write your message in letter format, like this letter (date at the top right, a greeting on the left and the message below that, and a closing). Have your child read your message over with you. This entire process should take no more than 10-15 minutes each day but it is very important to your child's learning that you do it daily. Anyone at home may write back to your child—a parent, another relative or sibling, or a family friend. The important thing is that your child receive a reply. The Family Message Journal must come back to school each day. Your child will be sharing your reply with me and with the class at times. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Thank you for working with your child on this important homework!

Sincerely,

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